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## If the Zoot Fits, Wear It: The Democratic Potential of Demotic Language in Twenty-First Century South Africa

### Abstract

Post-apartheid South Africa is emerging politically and economically as a kind of go-between — a relatively poor link to the richer nations of the West (or North, or First World — however one formulates them), and a relatively rich link to the poorer nations of Africa. As such, there are at least two major forces operating on it: forces pushing it to integrate as a player in a global capitalist order, and forces driving it to lead a specifically African Renaissance. These forces are not new, exactly; rather, they are exemplary of the problems of all newly independent African nations caught between the rock of global power and the hard place of national autonomy. In almost all cases, the economic and political forces are reflected culturally by forces affecting languages, forces that, on the one hand, draw African nations and individual Africans to adopt 'international' languages as their official language, and forces that, on the other hand, draw African nations and individual Africans to promote and preserve indigenous languages. In the latter category, no one has more eloquently and passionately set out a case for using indigenous languages as the tool for cultural assertion and ultimate liberation than the Gikuyu Kenyan novelist, Ngugi wa Thiong'o.<sup>1</sup>

SIMON LEWIS

## If the Zoot Fits, Wear It: The Democratic Potential of Demotic Language in Twenty-First Century South Africa

Post-apartheid South Africa is emerging politically and economically as a kind of go-between — a relatively poor link to the richer nations of the West (or North, or First World — however one formulates them), and a relatively rich link to the poorer nations of Africa. As such, there are at least two major forces operating on it: forces pushing it to integrate as a player in a global capitalist order, and forces driving it to lead a specifically African Renaissance. These forces are not new, exactly; rather, they are exemplary of the problems of all newly independent African nations caught between the rock of global power and the hard place of national autonomy. In almost all cases, the economic and political forces are reflected culturally by forces affecting languages, forces that, on the one hand, draw African nations and individual Africans to adopt ‘international’ languages as their official language, and forces that, on the other hand, draw African nations and individual Africans to promote and preserve indigenous languages. In the latter category, no one has more eloquently and passionately set out a case for using indigenous languages as *the* tool for cultural assertion and ultimate liberation than the Gikuyu Kenyan novelist, Ngugi wa Thiong’o.<sup>1</sup>

However, while the economic and political forces operating on newly independent South Africa may be similar to those operating in Kenya and elsewhere in Africa, the linguistic battle in South Africa is complicated by the presence of an indigenous hybrid, Afrikaans — an indigenous hybrid with a long history as a written language, to boot, producing both literature and laws, and thereby associated with the internal colonialism and racial domination of apartheid. Although it might seem counter-intuitive, this paper suggests that the best chance there might be for a national language of the new South Africa might be deracialised Afrikaans, a further creolisation of the language into what I am calling ‘Zoot Afrikaans’.

\* \* \*

There is an intriguing moment in Mickey Dube’s 1998 film of Alex la Guma’s 1962 short novel, *A Walk in the Night*, where the film-makers have conflated two scenes concerning language and foreignness in South Africa. In the opening scene of la Guma’s text, set in and around District Six in Cape Town, Mikey Adonis is

served, without incident, by a character identified only as a 'Swahili waiter' (4). Much later in the novella the drunken Willieboy picks a fight with three American sailors in Gipsy's brothel, angered that these 'foreigners' should be 'messing with our girls' (54, 55). The movie version, shifted temporally to post-apartheid South Africa and geographically to Johannesburg, conflates these two scenes, and shows Mikey, angered at being fired from his job, lashing out verbally at the waiter, whose lack of understanding of Afrikaans marks him as a foreigner. In what might be a rather sly joke, the movie gives this linguistic outsider a name — none other than Ngugi.

In the thirty-something years that separate these two versions, arguments have raged about language, its role in nationalism, and its ethnocentric and ideological biases. In South Africa, by the time La Guma was writing *A Walk in the Night* — in English, despite representing Afrikaans-speaking characters — Afrikaans had recently reached the peak of its official authority with the establishment in 1961 of the Republic of South Africa. Not only did that imagined national community represent (to itself) the triumph of white-skinned South Africans over darker ones, it also represented the long-delayed reversal of the defeat by one white language community (the Afrikaners) by another (the English) in the South African War of 1899–1902. During the apartheid years, the identification of Afrikaans with whiteness first tightened — notably in the destruction of those polyglot, mixed race enclaves of District Six in Cape Town and Sophiatown in Johannesburg — and then beganto unravel again. Subsequently, the creole, impure nature of Afrikaans began to offer implicit and explicit critique of apartheid notions of racial purity. Marlene van Niekerk's Noma award-winning novel *Triomf* (1994), whose publication coincided almost exactly with the onset of the post-apartheid era, probed apartheid's racial mythology and the National Party's deliberately deceptive deployment of the idea of whiteness in order to gain and maintain power between 1948 and 1994.

The ironically titled *Triomf* hammers the last nail into the coffin of the myth of a monolithic white, Christian, patriarchal, National Party-supporting Afrikanerdom. It does so by detailing the lives of a viciously dysfunctional and pathetically incestuous family, the Benades, consisting of an unholy trinity — father (Pop), son (Lambert), and unholy ghost (Treppie) — with Mol as a serially violated Mary. With a penurious origin in the depression of the 1930s, the Benades are just barely getting by in the white Johannesburg suburb hubristically called Triomf (Afrikaans for 'triumph') that apartheid town-planners had erected over the ruins of Sophiatown, the near-legendary mixed township central to the writers of the '*Drum* decade'.<sup>2</sup> More significantly, it does so by using a carnivalesque narrative style couched in a version of highly impure Afrikaans — one critic called it 'copulative-scatological' (cited in Viljoen 249) — that slips between languages and registers with dazzling effect. In the same way that Sophiatown had given rise to a 'new' hybrid *tsotsitaal*, named after the sharp young *tsotsis*

[gangsters] whose zoot suits gave them *their* name, so van Niekerk's *Triomf* opens the way for a streetwise Zoot African language that strips Afrikaans of its exclusively white sense of propriety and appropriation and returns it to its very origins as local creole, a potentially national language that, like South Africa's new democracy, is constantly in the making.

This claim may sound bizarre given the consolidation of Afrikaans as the official language of apartheid over the last half-century, but it is less bizarre when one considers the origin of the language more than three centuries ago, and the probability that the first written Afrikaans was produced in Arabic script to represent the language of the Cape Malay community,<sup>3</sup> or when one considers the further creolisation that occurred at the frayed boundaries of apartheid, notably in the 1950s, and particularly in those mixed urban areas of Sophiatown in Johannesburg and District 6 in Cape Town. With the removal of formal segregation in South Africa, as Paul Slabolepszy's character, Stix, puts it, 'Soweto has come to town' (121),<sup>4</sup> and such areas are now just as polyglot as they ever were; with racial discrimination now illegal rather than the guiding legal principle, contemporary South African writers of all races now face fascinating challenges to re-establish the continuity of translingual innovation that made Sophiatown and District 6 rough and ready models of the racial hodgepodge optimists call the rainbow nation.

Marlene van Niekerk has embraced this challenge with spectacular success. Two crucial scenes in *Triomf* bring the questions of racial and linguistic purity into particularly tight focus. In the first of these, Lambert, disturbed by an encounter with two AWB recruiters near the municipal dump where he has been scavenging, suffers a mild fit and is rescued from the oncoming garbage trucks by a black drifter called Sonnyboy, but to call Sonnyboy black or a drifter — or even Sonnyboy — is to assume a fixity of identity or to conform to ideologies of racial, cultural and linguistic identity that the passage undercuts. Van Niekerk's original text has Sonnyboy speaking mainly in English but slipping into Afrikaans and using the occasional Xhosa word; Lambert meantime also attempts to speak English, even going so far as to translate the place-name *Triomf* (211). In van Niekerk's original text, Sonnyboy's linguistic fluidity, and the fact that he starts off asking the questions, puts Lambert at a disadvantage, the same sort of disadvantage that Africans very frequently had endured under European rule. Van Niekerk represents Lambert's English as 'broken' in the same way that many European writers represented Africans' speech as broken or sub-standard, with all the obvious negative overtones connoted by that. As Sonnyboy goes on though, having won more of Lambert's confidence, he uses a mixture of Afrikaans and English ('daai's nou my luck ... toe kry ek 'n room in Bosmont' [212]) and Lambert goes back to his already rather impure Afrikaans as well as his broken English. The original text, therefore emphasises the similarity and mutual comprehensibility of the language or languages Sonnyboy and Lambert speak. Rather than speaking

languages that are distinct because of essential racial difference Sonnyboy and Lambert's immediate material surroundings in a postmodern urban setting, and their particular class positions (notably their restricted formal educations), force them to speak a shared language, less a nationally or ethnically definitive language perhaps than a class-bound register marked by slang, obscenity, and profanity. Van Niekerk then highlights this linguistic similarity not only by having Lambert struggle to classify Sonnyboy by race (because Sonnyboy is too yellow, Lambert cannot simply tell by looking [212]), but by giving Sonnyboy a pair of reflector shades. The shades obstruct Lambert's ability to figure Sonnyboy out but, more importantly, they reflect what he, Lambert, is. Rather than being Lambert's racial and linguistic other, implies van Niekerk, Sonnyboy is closer to being Lambert's 'Los' double — both are neglected strays at the margins of South African society.

The culminating scene in which Lambert attempts to entertain the prostitute that his brother Treppie has hired for him as a 40<sup>th</sup> birthday present, similarly shows that the woman's colouredness does not substantially differentiate her from Lambert. She switches from English to Afrikaans, and laughs at Lambert for thinking she was a 'Creole from Creolia or someplace' (Van Niekerk/de Kock 447). 'Of course I can speak Afrikaans', she says: 'Lat ek vir djou se, Mister Ballroom Champ, is ma just a lekker coffee-colour dolly what can mix her languages' (449). Lambert tells himself, still assuming white superiority, that 'a bit of the dark stuff is no problem for him', and he is outraged when she tells him, 'You're not even white, man, you're a fucken backward piece of low-class shit, that's what you are. Useless fucken white trash' (448). The encounter goes from bad to worse, and Mary finally pulls Lambert's pants down but only as a means to disable him, effectively hobbling him with his own underpants.

The symbolism in these two scenes is clear enough, but the linguistic subtlety is hard to catch in translation. In a work-in-progress published in *Illuminations'* 1998 special issue on South African literature, Leon de Kock retained Sonnyboy's language almost verbatim and even keeps the distinction between Lambert's use of English and Afrikaans as the scene progresses.<sup>6</sup> This, of course, would be peculiar in a translation of the full novel, as its logic would imply that all the dialogue ought to be in the original language. Indeed, the logic pushing de Kock the other way for the international version published by Little, Brown in 1999 insisted that a translation should translate, so that the published book has the entire exchange in English with only one or two local South African slang terms (interestingly enough, the derogatory 'kaffir' appears to need no gloss, while Sonnyboy's one Africanism 'pola' is retained).<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, however, the translation loses the linguistic awkwardness of Lambert's opening position in the encounter, and his discomfort and disadvantage emerge only as a result of his physical dependency on Sonnyboy's assistance.

As translator, de Kock discovered a number of other difficulties rendering *Triomf* into English, especially for monolingual, non-South African readers. Van

Niekerk's original novel is a raucous garish book full of extra-lingual noise and clatter like a manic animated movie with the soundtrack turned up so loud it makes the cinema seats vibrate. Scarcely a page goes by without van Niekerk trying to catch the sound of things breaking, fireworks exploding, wooden floor blocks clicking, dogs' tails knocking against furniture, Coke cans opening, beer bottles spraying, or Treppie 'ghloob-ghloobing' back a shot of Klipdrif brandy. It would be very easy to imagine a 'translation' of *Triomf* as comic book, in fact, with the sound effects written into the cartoon panels, and some of the comedy of the novel has a similarly comic-book feel. The scene in which Treppie goes out into the street one night to get all the dogs of Triomf barking stands out as a particularly comic example, as does the scene in which Lambert disturbs the bees when trying to fix the roof of 127 Martha Street. Van Niekerk describes Lambert 'sprinting round the side of the house, with Gerty on his heels, his mouth opening and closing. The bees were clogged in a black swarm around his head. ... Treppie meanwhile was running in circles on the roof' (Van Niekerk/de Kock 143). Later, in the Walpurgisnacht scene between Lambert and the prostitute and finally in the election day scene in which Pop dies, the comedy is very dark indeed, but the sheer hyperbole of Lambert's actions in this last instance — breaking Treppie's fingers, smashing Pop over the head, and stabbing Mol — is balanced against the absurdity of his then breaking his own leg while trying to kick the dog Toby. This last scene also lends itself to very clear visualisation of symbol, with the house inside and out being draped while the workmen of Wonder Wall Paints prepare to spray the entire place white.

The vividness of this and other scenes seems to come straight out of the pages of comic-book representations of street-life as featured by *Drum* magazine from the 1950s on. The *Drum* editors revelled in the linguistic impurity of *tsotsitaal*, setting it in a context of boisterous defiance in gangsterism, big-shotism, and, almost inevitably it seems, sexism.<sup>8</sup> *Triomf*, which repeatedly points out that the events it describes take place on the very same earth as that of the vibrant polyglot Sophiatown that the *Drum* writers celebrated, shows that in many ways the bulldozing of Kofifi (the affectionate local name for Sophiatown) and its replacement by the white suburb of Triomf could not finally overcome the entropic force of Sophiatown. In fact, Sophiatown is to Triomf what Sonnyboy is to Lambert — they are reflector-shade versions of each other.

While T.S. Eliot famously thought it the role of a poet to purify the dialect of the tribe, this essay praises impurity precisely as a means to move beyond tribalism. Eliot too, however, before his elevation to the high-priesthood of high culture, had recognised the potential of the demotic,<sup>9</sup> and in the contemporary wastelands of postmodern urban South Africa Zoot, Afrikaans is perfectly capable of the sort of lyricism necessary for a language to have status and self-respect. Even in their marginalised lives on a ruinous dump the Benades have their moments of lyricism and transcendence. For example, Pop's surreal and apparently telepathic dream

of dog heaven (181–92, 213–27) is comical and lyrical, pathetic and beautiful at the same time; in his dream he and Mol are among the stars in dog-heaven where

The stars all have points in a circle, but actually they're postboxes with a mouth so you can post letters to your loved ones on earth. In fact, they're two-way postboxes with doors at the back that you can open, and every day you get mail from your people on earth. Every day we get letters from people we don't know, but they say they're family of ours. Then we read them to each other. Dogs can read too in heaven, you know. The letters are full of nice news from the world below.

(Van Niekerk/de Kock 217)

More importantly, van Niekerk has given to the viciously clever Treppie an insightful critique of the vapid officialese that characterises most of the linguistic-nationalist fashioning of the political, religious, and media establishments. Recognising the empty rhetoric of Afrikaner nationalism throughout his life — in the re-enactment of the Great Trek in 1938, in Malan's redeployment of the Great Trek in the crucial election win in 1948, in the constant harking on the family as cornerstone of the Volk during the apartheid years — Treppie disdains the 'wallpaper' language that National Party politicians used to create and dupe their Afrikaner constituency. He also disdains the anodyne 'wallpaper' images of advertising, which similarly interpellate their audience, offering substanceless images of well-being and happiness. Linking the two interpellations, Treppie scathingly rejects the 'new' National Party campaign rhetoric in the first fully multi-racial election of 1994, which he sees as 'the same old rubbish recycled under a new name. But the rubbish itself is a brandless substance' (361). The debasement and poverty of the Benades' own lives completely belie both the political and the consumerist rhetoric. As Eve Bertelsen explains, '[t]he idea most mercilessly parodied in *Triomf* is that of purity, here, the sacred Afrikaner notion of "eie" (as in own culture, volk and family). By literally acting out its precept, the Benades push "eie" to absurdity: they are decisively self-propagating, self-sufficient, and self-destructive' (n.p.)

Strangely enough, Treppie's critique of the 'wallpaper' blandness of establishment-speak resonates with a more recent novel where, at first sight, the critique of language seems to be completely reversed.<sup>10</sup> In Ivan Vladislavic's *The Restless Supermarket*, published in 2001, but set, like *Triomf*, in the period immediately preceding the 1994 elections and in the rapidly changing demography of suburban Johannesburg, the narrator Aubrey Tearle is a stereotypically pedantic retired proof reader who bemoans the lack of precision that arises when people fail to use language correctly (for example, in describing a supermarket as 'restless' to mean that it is never closed). There are numerous points of comparison between Vladislavic's novel and *Triomf*, notably in the novel's climactic scene in which the self-deluded, intellectually arrogant, purity-obsessed Aubrey ends up spending the night walking around the demographically shifting Johannesburg with a woman of indeterminate race whose first name, Shirilaine, is a 'portmanteau' (289), and



whose last name is 'Brown. True enough' (284), and 'the precise shade of [whose] skin' troubles the pedantic Tearle: 'The obvious choices had adjectives clinging to them, like swatches from the do-it-yourself counter, tropical sands, amber dawn. But it was more like fudge' (296). Despite his still-racist shafts of wit, Tearle, in these final scenes, comes to recognise Shirlaine's better qualities and appears to achieve some sort of humility about his own position and his own passion for purity. In a final epiphany, he recognises at last that the old order — linguistic, political, and demographic — is over; looking out over a distinctly *Triomf*-esque urban landscape of 'mining wasteland, and beyond them the southern suburbs, the buffer zones, filling up with informal settlements, and the townships' he acknowledges that 'Movements were afoot in those dark spaces that would never be reflected in the telephone directories. Languages were spoken there that I would never put to the proof' (304). The future belongs to the portmanteau.

Clearly Zoot Afrikaans could not be the language of officialdom or of the law as principles of civility would rule out members of parliament talking about bills in the scatological-reproductive language prevalent in *Triomf*, and the rule of law could not operate without clear definitions of terms. It might nevertheless be a unifying, anti-elitist force among the South African urban working class that keeps politicians honest, whether they push globalisation through the medium of English or factionalism through the promotion of apparently pure and separate local languages. To be able to do so, however, this new hybrid needs to gain some sort of public recognition, and the implications of adopting some form of new vernacular nation language for publishing and education may be impossibly complicated. Quite apart from a likely dearth of government support, the whole publishing and education system is geared to recognisably different languages that one can more or less adequately translate into other recognisably different languages. The hope therefore lies in independent organisations, and it would be great to see writers' groups and publishing houses like Queillerie (which published *Triomf*) or Kwela Books promoting even more linguistically transgressive texts, texts that resist the anodyne wallpaper effect of interpellation by international market forces or by local politicians.<sup>11</sup> Such texts might not have much of a market outside South Africa, but in asserting South Africa's national difference — whether from Americans or Kenyans — surely it makes sense that a twenty-first century Alex la Guma should no longer feel constrained to translate himself into a language that, as Ngugi argues, comes so laden with alien cultural baggage that it cannot truly express his specific community, history and relationship to the world (Ngugi 16).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*.

<sup>2</sup> Founded in 1951 *Drum* magazine became the most significant medium of expression for a generation of black South African writers, including Lewis Nkosi, Can Themba,

Nat Nakasa, Bloke Modisane, and Ezekiel Mphahlele. Nkosi writes of the fifties as a 'fabulous decade', and, while more sober assessments of the magazine's brashly commercial irresponsibility and sexism have surfaced in recent years, all literary and social historians acknowledge the magazine's centrality to the assertion of an emergent urban black identity that countered the Verwoerdian ideals of apartheid both in theory and practice (see Nkosi, Chapman, Driver).

- <sup>3</sup> On the origins of written Afrikaans see Davids, or Worden, van Heyningen, and Bickford-Smith. The term Malay is something of a misnomer (see Worden, et al. 127, and Kruger 113), but is still in widespread use to describe the generally Coloured, generally Islamic population of Cape Town dating from the eighteenth century importation of slaves and workers from the Dutch East Indies and Dutch possessions in India itself.
- <sup>4</sup> Slabolepszy's *Mooi Street Moves* (Graver 113–53) uses English as its primary language but tells the story of white, Afrikaans-speaking Henry Stone, 'adrift in a rapidly changing, unfamiliar world' where he 'must rely on the good graces of an urban Black' (114). This reversal of the familiar 'Jim Comes to Jo'burg' trope casts Henry Stone and Stix Letsebe as reflector-shade doubles akin to Lambert and Sonnyboy. Henry's increasing ability to cope with contemporary urban life is measured by his increasing fluency in the demotic, highly creolised language Stix teaches him.
- <sup>5</sup> Afrikaner Weerstand Beweging [Afrikaner Resistance Movement], a quasi-Nazi political organisation led by Eugene Terre'Blanche, active in the interregnum between apartheid and the first ANC-dominated government, and particularly drawing support from poor rural Afrikaners on the Highveld.
- <sup>6</sup> In an e-mail Leon de Kock described this scene as 'one of the key nodes of untranslatability in the novel. The reflector-man's lingo is untranslatable because it is thoroughly multilingual already. This is a case where to "translate" would be to traduce. The sheer joy of his language lies in its hybridity. Now, however, one faces two options ... either do as Cormac McCarthy does in his novels and just go with the unglossed (Spanish in McCarthy's case), which adds in a way to the heterogeneity of the piece and to its cultural difference — arguably it is a political decision NOT to reduce such heterogeneity to the bland neutrality of pure, or standard, English; or, make reasonable accommodations with your likely readers, who are in different cultural contexts and cannot always be expected to make the feints and shifts a SA reader is able to make. For the most part, I'm prepared to shift register for the international audience. But that reflector man is a key problem. To traduce his lingo would be exactly the wrong thing to do, it seems to me' (personal e-mail, December 17th, 1997). See also de Kock's comments in Shaun de Waal's long review 'A Novel that Finds Adversity in Triumph'.
- <sup>7</sup> In the version translated by W.P.B. Botha, published in *Index in Censorship* (that is, for another international readership) again, the translation relies entirely on English words, with the exception of *kaffir*, *dagga*, and *takkies*.
- <sup>8</sup> In *The Drum Decade: Stories from the 1950s*, Michael Chapman includes the example of 'Baby, Come Duze' a 1956 photo-story by Can Themba and Gopal Naransamy (109–113). The original piece had the following introduction: 'There's a new lingo in the townships, bright as the bright-boys, made of Afrikaans, Zulu, Sotho, English and brand-new words. Here's a story in lingo — and explanations' (109). The placing of Afrikaans first in the list is no mere indication of alphabetism, as Afrikaans provides

the core of the language. The story itself sketches out a tale of a woman swept off her feet by one of the 'bright boys', and ends with her commenting admiringly that if the baby she is carrying turns out like his father, 'dan maak hy nyakanyaka onder die cherrekies net soos hom ganbini' [he'll cause trouble among the little girls just like his father] (113).

- <sup>9</sup> I am thinking both of Eliot's own use of vernacular, particularly at the end of the 'A Game of Chess' section of *The Waste Land* and in his Sweeney poems, and of his championing of Kipling's verse. The much more conservative language of *Four Quartets* stands in stark contrast to the earlier work.
- <sup>10</sup> Vladislavic's fictional proof reader's dismay at the 'decline of standards' in public versions of English is mirrored by broadcaster and journalist Robert Kirby. Attacking contemporary sloppiness Kirby writes, 'Any respect for — never mind preservation of — the grace and subtlety of English has long since been drowned in the sullen howling of democratic throats' (*Mail and Guardian*, December 31, 2001 online). Kirby does, however, moderate his apparently anti-democratic tone by arguing that the listeners are the losers when broadcasters use a 'spiritless mode of spoken English ... akin to George Orwell's "Newspeak", an official language that progressively limits the range of ideas and independent thought'.
- <sup>11</sup> The movement towards this kind of language is already evident in South African poetry where writers and performers have used considerable linguistic variation for some time. Wopko Jensma is perhaps a pioneering figure in this regard, while contemporary black poets such as Lesego Rampolokeng, Seithamo Motsapi, and Bonani Vila have made a feature of stretching English beyond any limits that Vladislavic's Aubrey Tearle would permit.

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